GQ, December 2003

GREETINGS FROM GORGEOUS GUANTÁNAMO!

Our writer went to Camp Delta in search of answers about our government's treatment of prisoners of the war on terror. Instead, he got an object lesson in military spin control

I recently spent three days at Guantánamo Bay, the American naval enclave in Communist Cuba where the Pentagon has stashed some 660 alleged Al Qaeda and Taliban fighters captured in Afghanistan, and I learned several factoids of the sort that, in their colorful specificity, incline a journalist to work them into the early paragraphs of an article. Among these: There is a man, a Cuban exile named Harry Sharpe, who has lived and worked within the 45-square-mile confines of the base for the past forty years. The plastic utensil given to detainees with each of their three daily meals is a spork. The medicines dispensed by the Camp Delta pharmacy include the antidepressant Zoloft and the muscle ointment Bengay. The interrogators here are grouped into five-member "Tiger Teams," and over the past year they have developed an incentive system featuring precisely twenty-three different rewards for prisoners. The ultimate incentive, short of being released, is to be moved from one of the three maximum-security units in Camp Delta to its medium-security unit, Camp 4. Detainees call this short but coveted journey "the hajj," and upon getting the nod from Joint Task Force (JTF) administrators, the lucky prisoner takes a victory lap around his forty-eight-cell block, shaking hands with and saying good-bye to those he's leaving behind, who chant and whoop. Otherwise, the most popular of the incentives is a Filet-O-Fish sandwich, with a cold Mountain Dew to wash it down.

I came by these details not through espionage—the technique that at least three Guantánamo personnel are now alleged to have employed in smuggling classified information off the base—but in interviews with various people over the course of my visit. On each occasion, I was chaperoned by Lieutenant Colonel Pamela Hart, the newly appointed head of Public Affairs for the JTF. She'd been on the job only three weeks and seemed not yet at ease. In interviews, she sat silently, listening in, and it was easy to forget the degree to which my visit was scripted, until one soldier went off script.

The time this happened, I was interviewing a guard named Bill Gibbs, a reservist with an MP unit from Michigan whose shift at Camp Delta had just ended. Little has been disclosed about exactly who the detainees are, beyond basic demographics: Saudi Arabia and Yemen are heavily represented, as are Afghanistan and, to a lesser extent, Pakistan. As for the fifty-odd detainees whose names have surfaced, nothing is publicly known about what specifically the men stand accused, or suspected, of having done. Guards such as Gibbs don't get much information either. The military's official position is that every detainee at Camp Delta belongs there; the commander of the operation maintains that they are all enemy combatants who have supported terrorism in some way. Gibbs, who was wearing camouflage and slouching in a folding metal chair in the spartan plywood hut we were in, was saying that it was his understanding that "over half" the detainees had admitted to being involved in terrorism. Hart was watching him silently. Gibbs continued, "But the ones that I think are *not* terrorists—"

"That's just speculation," Hart said, cutting Gibbs off.

Gibbs froze and looked anxiously at Hart. Then, hesitantly, he resumed talking and I learned several more factoids. Among the ingenious ways detainees have amused themselves and marked time at Camp Delta are: fashioning boats out of toilet paper, placing apple cores on the floor and watching ants congregate around them, and devising a calendar by collaging cell walls with stickers peeled from mealtime fruit.

When we finished, Gibbs turned to Hart and asked, "How'd we do, Ma'am?"

*****

To get to Guantánamo Bay, I was instructed to report to Naval Station Roosevelt Roads, on the eastern tip of Puerto Rico, at 5 a.m. on a Wednesday. After sweating through a gauntlet of bomb dogs, latex-gloved MPs,

magnetometers and paperwork, journalists fly via military transport into the sleepy leeward side of Gitmo, as the base is affectionately known among its residents. Media are billeted not far from the airstrip in a low-rise dormitory called Combined Bachelor Quarters. It is from this base of operations that a weekly three-day ritual of controlling, denying and infantilizing journalists proceeds.

Before September 11, Gitmo was dying. A geohistorical oddity dating from 1903, when it was leased to the United States as a coaling station, the base served America during the Cold War mainly as an ever-extended middle finger to Fidel Castro ("a dagger plunged into the heart of Cuban soil," El Jefe once called it). After September 11, the base suddenly acquired new value, as an isolated penal colony and legal no-man's-land where interrogation and detention could be conducted without risk of Al Qaeda attack, unwanted media scrutiny or interference from pesky human-rights types. A cluster of pre-existing chain-link cages, dubbed Camp X-Ray, began receiving captives from Afghanistan in January 2002. Since then the population here has doubled, to more than 5,000, and the sun-dried nine-hole golf course and one of only two McDonald's in the Communist world have been joined by Subway, KFC Express and nightly first-run movies.

Along the coast, a few miles east of the mouth of the bay, contractors have built three camps. Delta, the permanent detention facility with running water that replaced X-Ray, is a supermax warren of steel-mesh cages built of Conex shipping containers; they are ringed with concentric green-screened Cyclone fences bristling with concertina wire, and they house some 660 bushy-bearded alleged Islamic terrorists and their abettors, flown here from Afghanistan as recently as three weeks before my visit. Then there is Camp America, which houses the mainly Reservist soldiers guarding Delta. And finally, there is Camp Iguana, a two-unit cinderblock structure surrounded by a chain-link fence, which houses the three detainees under the age of 16. At the time of my visit, there was growing talk that military tribunals might soon be held here too, and a pale yellow clapboard building near the mouth of the bay had been renovated to accommodate them. A permanent settlement was taking shape.

If September 11 resuscitated a dying Naval base, it also threw journalists into disarray. Suddenly, the self-righteous, no-holds-barred aggression that had characterized the press's relationship with the government for three decades, since Watergate and the Pentagon Papers, collided with the raw human fear felt by journalists for whom Washington, D.C., and New York City were not just datelines but their homes as well. American media were cast in an unaccustomed ambivalent role. As a new world dawned, the government asked the public and the media to trust it.

Guantánamo, rightly, would exceed the media's capacity for trust. The U.S. government was indefinitely detaining unnamed people, for unknown and untested reasons, without access to lawyers and without the full rights bestowed on prisoners of war by Geneva Convention III. The pics seen round the world—those Hannibal Lecter photographs of manacled, orange-jumpsuited, black-goggle-wearing, earplugged-and-gagged detainees on their knees—drew international cries of outrage. Just a few months after the administration denounced the detainees as "killers" (George W. Bush), "the worst of a very bad lot" (Dick Cheney) and "the hardest of the hard-core" (Donald Rumsfeld), Deputy Secretary of Defense Paul Wolfowitz acknowledged that some of the detainees may turn out to have been harmless. Gitmo's PR problems only got worse as unhappy detainees started trying to kill themselves (there have been thirty-two suicide attempts to date).

In hindsight, the early days of the operation were a golden age for journalists, who observed Camp X-Ray detainees from a safe distance and moved about with a modicum of freedom. In the first three months, more than 200 journalists visited. Carol Rosenberg, a foreign-affairs correspondent with the *Miami Herald*, spent more than 150 days on the base in 2002. Now, she notes wistfully, the only way into Gitmo is on a "package tour." These days, three or four media outlets rotate each week for a Tuesday-to-Friday visit, and all go through essentially the same routine: Until recently, a meeting with the Muslim chaplain who ministers to the detainees, as well as with the supervisor of their halal meals, was scheduled into every visit, the better to show how far the government goes in respecting the religious beliefs of these people, whose religious beliefs allegedly led them to seek to destroy America. At the time of my visit, the chaplain was Youssef Yee, who would later be arrested on suspicion of spying for Syria, but he was unexpectedly "unavailable," and I was fobbed off on an uninformed Christian chaplain who'd had zero interaction with detainees.

Last December the government began allowing journalists into Camp Delta, but this sign of glasnost is misleading. Controls are actually more stringent than ever. Nonetheless, journalists like me continue to pour into the base each week, in search of a story about what is going on inside. And in light of the overbearing controls imposed on media visits here, if you are one of these journalists, you may leave Gitmo straining to recall why, exactly, you went in the first place. "I wonder that every time I go," says Paisley Dodds, who as the Caribbean-news editor for the Associated Press, has visited Guantanamo eight times in the past two years. Journalists who make the trip have to ask themselves whether they are really serving as accomplices to propaganda, bearing witness not so much to history as to a tropical Potemkin Village or a bad reality TV show called *Detention Island*.

* * * * *

A man's ass dangled inches from my face. Mottled green and brown, it belonged to a camouflaged MP who sat suspended on a strap halfway in and halfway out of a hole in the roof of a sweltering Humvee. He was manning the vehicle's MK 64 machine gun and was one-sixth of a six-man, two-Humvee infantry patrol I had been invited to join—accompanied, of course, by the ever-present Lieutenant Colonel Hart.

We were rattling east along the coast through a distinctly unlush landscape, a dust-parched desert of cacti and thorn scrub, and the driver, a night-shift millworker from Ohio named Ricky Jason Ware, who'd been deployed to Guantanamo with his National Guard light-infantry unit, was explaining that their mission was to look for "anything out of the ordinary."
"Anything we haven't seen in the last eight months," added the radioman, First Lieutenant John Zeh.

Given that there have been no escape or rescue attempts in the two years since X-Ray opened, "anything out of the ordinary" tends to be limited to stray pieces of unexploded ordnance left over from some past war game. One time the men found horse spurs dating from the late 1800s. "We also found a really old Cuban Coke bottle," Specialist Ware said. He'd been told it was worth between $200 and $500.

Did he get to keep it?

"Hell, yeah," he said.

This answer didn't sit well with Lieutenant Colonel Hart, who promptly interjected that soldiers always give any such finds to the base museum. Ware shrugged and said he thought another of the drivers had given it to a collector buddy.

In every other way, the patrol hewed to the script, which is tailored to project the American military's strength and preparedness. Requests to see the detainees' library or to speak with the camp psychiatrist are denied or ignored: The Joint Task Force has put several curbs in place to control journalists, including escorts like Lieutenant Colonel Hart who shadow them with the devotion of KGB minders; a virtual prohibition against speaking with base civilians without authorization; a ban on panoramic camera angles near Camp Delta; and the hanging of green nylon screens to block the view of detainees. What you get is more a window onto the state of government-press relations than a glimpse of anything having to do with the detainees. You get a three-day trip to the most aggressively choreographed place on earth.

Our Humvee pulled onto an outcropping overlooking the sea and came to a stop; this was what the soldiers called a known area of interest, essentially an observation point, inexplicably abbreviated as NAI. The gunner picked up his binoculars and scanned the horizon.

How many NAIs were there?

"No numbers," Hart cut in, preempting an answer.

The infantry unit on this patrol had been there for seven months and looked to be getting out in the fall. "I've been in [the army] for almost nine years now and had never gone anywhere, done anything," said Ware, the driver, "so

this is exciting for me." The climactic event on today's patrol would be seeing an iguana.

The understanding that you are being manipulated in no way detracts from the missionary earnestness of the tour guides. At checkpoints, guards would say "Honor bound," and Hart and another minder would return with "Defend freedom," a patriotic call-and-response devised by the two-star general currently in charge of the operation. Hart had recently been transferred out of the army's Office of Protocol in Washington, D.C.—where she attended to such ceremonial minutiae as seating arrangements and the dietary preferences of the military leadership—so she was glad to be doing something with "real-world relevance. I mean, I'm glad General Shinseki likes salmon, but I just couldn't get into it." She was eligible for retirement in two years but wasn't sure if she'd continue with PR in the private sector; she had no interest in flacking toothpaste. "I need a cause," she said.

Still, the sincerity of Hart and her colleagues offers little consolation to journalists. "It's incredibly difficult to work as a journalist in Guantánamo," the AP's Dodds says. "We have little access, our interviews are monitored, and answers to legitimate questions are often silenced with the phrase 'operational security,' which has become a mantra of sorts. There are no scoops here."

The centerpiece of the tour is the visit to Camp Delta on day two, and the centerpiece of that visit is a six-foot-eight-inch-by-eight-foot cell. When I was there, the camp commander, a barrel-chested, brush-'stached, Stacy Keach look-alike named Sergeant Major John Van Natta, was near the end of his deployment. In civilian life he is the superintendent of the biggest prison in Indiana, a state-of-the-art facility he extols with the zeal of an IT guy discussing all the nifty plug-ins for the new Windows. In nine months at Camp Delta, he had implemented a dazzling array of security know-how. The smattering of wooden guard towers now stood idle, replaced by a central concrete command tower with electronic control of locks and video surveillance of every cell block. To reach the cell, we passed through maybe five "sally ports," security airlocks in which a gate must close behind you before the gate in front of you is opened. When I say "we," I mean all nine of us. My entourage now included, in addition to the warden, the military commander of the camp, two public-affairs flacks, and four guards wearing Madonna headsets. Your tax dollars at work.

We entered the showcase supermax cell. An elevated steel platform supported a three-inch foam mattress and a still-life arrangement of the personal effects detainees are granted: an orange jumpsuit, a "thumb toothbrush" too small to be converted into a weapon; clear toothpaste and shampoo to avoid a possible hiding place for a weapon; prayer beads; a Koran inside a surgical mask hanging from a steel-grate wall that doubled as the wall of the adjacent cell; an adjustable black prayer cap; and a small plastic bottle of prayer oil. Van Natta pointed out the much-publicized arrow to Mecca stenciled on the bed ledge, a yoga-mat-like mattress for praying, and an "Asian-style toilet," which, Van Natta joked, "normally the PAO [Hart] will demonstrate the use of." A few people laughed.

"Not today," Hart said drily.

Whatever bellicose glee may lurk below the surface here—on my plane out, a passenger was wearing a Guantánamo Bay T-shirt that read: TALIBAN TOWERS: THE CARIBBEAN'S NEWEST NO-STAR RESORT—sensitivity is the watchword at Camp Delta. I was denied my request to visit Camp X-Ray, the now-empty original detention facility, because, Colonel Hart said, "it gives an improper image of what we are. It looks so awful, so inhumane. We work so hard to get away from that." And to listen to the soldiers at Guantánamo talk about Camp Iguana, which houses the three juvenile detainees, you might think you had stumbled on an orphanage run by the Children's Defense Fund. While the adult detainees are "interrogated," the young residents of Iguana are merely "debriefed" and given "an opportunity to discuss what they went through." Unlike Delta, Iguana has air-conditioning and National Geographic and Disney videos. "We try to keep more of a homey, relaxed environment here," explained a guard who in civilian life is a middle-school teacher.

In the sample cell, we had been within Camp 1, but with no detainees in sight. Citing the provision in the Geneva Convention that prisoners "shall not be exposed to public curiosity or ridicule," the military forbids media contact with detainees. Curiously, this hadn't kept the military from admitting me to the bedroom of one of the juveniles, where I could see that the teen wore laceless running shoes and used what appeared to be Speed Stick. Nor does the

same Geneva Convention provision keep the military from admitting reporters to medium-security Camp 4 to see the more relaxed conditions there—including real live prisoners. Lieutenant Colonel Hart asked me to remove my media badge as we entered 4, and reminded me that I would be expelled for initiating contact with any detainees or responding to any initiated by them. On September 11, 2002, an Italian film crew shot the coastline near Camp Delta, and naval criminal investigators searched their rooms; two tapes were confiscated, and the crew were banned from Delta for the remainder of their visit. A similar incident, involving the BBC, took place this past June. The public-affairs officials say it is always the British and Australian reporters who come on strong in interviews, asking things like "How can you sleep at night knowing these people don't have the same rights you do?"

The gate into Camp 4 opened onto a broad gravel plaza chopped up by fences into four communal-living blocks (detainees here live ten to a room), a few rec yards and some walkways. Immediately to the right, a dozen or so white-jumpsuited, Arab-looking men with beards milled around, talking, drinking water, finishing up lunch. Some looked over at the civilian surrounded by guards walking past their cage. A couple studied posters mounted on the outside of their cell building. I asked what the posters were and was told they were "informational posters" with "pictures of detainees as they work their way through the system," including pictures of released detainees "to encourage cooperation."

As we passed behind another of the Camp 4 buildings, three younger men with shorter beards, alone in the gravel yard out back, grinned, one waving and another giving a thumbs-up. When we again passed near the posters I'd seen earlier, I got a closer look. Some of them showed views through a triptych of windows with ogee arches, as if from within a mosque.

When I mentioned this, I again got the sense I had touched on a sensitive topic, but I didn't press. I wasn't acting out of patriotism, and I wasn't being polite to preserve access; I simply understood I wasn't going to get anything out of these people. One should no more seek information at Camp Delta than one should expect to have an educational experience at Disney World.

* * * * *

The final interview was with the commander of the Joint Task Force, a two-star general named Geoffrey Miller. Captain Michael Moss, my other public-affairs minder, and I arrived early, and as we sat in the car outside JTF headquarters, we talked about media coverage of the operation. "So many times," he said, "international media forget why the detainees are here."

But isn't that the problem? The media don't *know* why the detainees are here or how they're really being treated or even what they're charged with.

"You've got to have confidence the government is screening well in Afghanistan," Moss said. "You've got to have confidence in the government."

Must we?

Introspection is not prized here. A framed sign mounted on a wall in Camp America quotes Donald Rumsfeld: "If you are not criticized, you may not be doing anything," a motto that absolves anyone from thinking too hard about the rightness or wrongness of what he's doing.

When the general was ready to see me, it became clear that he shared this attitude. The information sheet given to journalists before they visit Gitmo promises a trip to the commissary for "T-shirts and coffee mugs, time permitting," and Moss had accompanied me there while we killed time before the Miller interview. At the checkout counter, I'd bought an *Economist* with these words on its cover: UNJUST, UNWISE, UNAMERICAN. WHY TERRORIST TRIBUNALS ARE WRONG. Now in General Miller's office, I placed it in on the table in front of him. He gave it a quick look, then ignored it and, leaning back in his chair, talked in a buttery Texas twang about the "global war on terror" and how "we're winning the fight every day."

Unlike everyone else at the base, Miller was willing to talk about the interrogation process, and, in fact, he bragged about its progress. He said that in June his team had obtained five times the intelligence from detainees that they had obtained in January. Interrogation takes place seven days a week, for "no more than" sixteen hours a day unless the Pentagon gives special permission to extend it. He said: "We're forceful. Not physically forceful, but this is an intense operation." Every week Miller reviews whether to recommend to the Pentagon that a detainee be transferred or released; so far, at the time of my visit, sixty-eight detainees had been returned to their home countries.

When the conversation turned back to the legal and ethical questions raised by his operation, he reverted to good-soldier mode. "If this is a controversial mission, gosh, that's a lot of policy concerns," Miller said. "There's no controversy *inside* Camp Delta." What about the inconsistent application of the Geneva Conventions here? "These are enemy combatants not covered by the Geneva Conventions," Miller said, contradicting the opinion of many experts in military law. "Does the Geneva Convention need to be updated? That's for legal scholars to make that decision."

* * * * *

That evening, after enjoying a Mongolian-barbecue dinner with eight soldiers on the terrace of the base's Bayview Club, I rode along with a Coast Guard unit charged with port security. The boat was a twenty-five-foot Boston Whaler outfitted with two side-mounted M60 machine guns and an M50 in the bow. We shot across the bay, looped around its windward lip, and sped east toward Camp Delta. As the skipper took the boat up to twenty knots, the hull rose off the water and slammed down rhythmically on the chop.

It was an exhilarating, beautiful ride, but I couldn't help wondering what I was doing there. All I'd really learned was that there are still some 660 detainees whose names and crimes and home countries, for the most part, we don't know; who don't have lawyers; who haven't been charged with anything; some of whom might be innocent; and that there was nothing I could do about it other than talk about the Filet-o-Fish sandwich. While arrogantly misinterpreting international law, Donald Rumsfeld has arrogantly misinterpreted the First Amendment, offering in its stead taxpayer-funded field trips replete with stir-fry, canned answers and a series of amusement-park rides.

The fact is that Guantánamo itself, for all we know, is just another part of the script: It's a convenient sensory bull's eye, a publicized place the world focuses on while who-knows-what goes on at other rumored centers of interrogation around the world, from Diego Garcia U.S. Navy support facility in the Indian Ocean to Uzbekhistan to Morocco. No journalists are going to those places, because no journalists are being invited. As our boat pulled in to the dock on the leeward side of the bay, the commander apologized that we hadn't seen any dolphins.